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Employability of Women with Disabilities

Breaching the Disability Wall

A Brief to the
to the
Standing Committee on Human Resources,
Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities
Consultations on Employability in Canada
September, 2006

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Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women

The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women was established by provincial statute in 1977. The Council's mandate under the Advisory Council on the Status of Women Act is to advise the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women and to bring forward the concerns of women in Nova Scotia.

The Council's work touches on all areas of women's lives, including...

- ♀ family life
- ♀ economics
- ♀ legal rights
- ♀ sexuality
- ♀ health
- ♀ education
- ♀ paid and unpaid work
- ♀ violence

Council pays close attention to the experiences of women who face barriers to full equality because of race, age, language, class, ethnicity, religion, ableness, sexual orientation, or various forms of family status.

We are committed to voicing women's concerns to government and the community through policy research, information services and community liaison. Working cooperatively with women and equality-seeking organizations, our mission is to advance equality, fairness and dignity for all women.

Executive Summary

This brief makes recommendations to foster the employability of women with disabilities, with a view to improving their economic security and ensuring that Canada benefits from their contributions. The brief reviews persuasive evidence for the continued economic and labour market difficulties confronting women with disabilities, and makes the following recommendations:

1. **A gender and diversity analysis of existing and proposed measures be conducted, to identify practical steps and new opportunities for the employment of women with disabilities.**

2. **All women with disabilities should have access to a system navigator/case worker whose primary responsibility is to ensure that the woman gets all the benefits and supports to which she is entitled, from federal, provincial and municipal sources.**

3. **Women with disabilities should be supported by Employability, Career Development and Employment Counseling programs in achieving their full educational potential in traditionally male-dominated as well as female-dominated fields, with a particular focus on science and technology occupations.**

4. **Employment Support Services for women with disabilities should include assistance for personal care, transportation, housework, child care and caregiving when they enter the paid workforce, through self-managed care programs funded through EAPD.**

5. **Access to Employability Support Services and bridging supports to well-paid work should be flexible and long-term, an investment in women with disabilities.**

6. **Review and amend the interaction among various income security benefits and social and health benefits to ensure that benefits are maintained and disincentives to employment are removed.**

7. **Federal, provincial and municipal governments should collaborate to improve accessible transportation services for women and men with disabilities.**

8. **Labour Standards legislation, both federally and provincially, should be amended to include requirements to accommodate the workplace needs of women and men with disabilities.**

9. **Improved support for the integration and accommodation of women with disabilities is especially important to small and medium business and non-profit organizations, since they are the employers of most Nova Scotians.**

Employability of Women with Disabilities:
Breaching the Disability Wall

The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women was established to bring forward the concerns of women and to provide advice to government on ways to advance equality, fairness and dignity for all women. During the past 30 years, we have addressed this mission through hundreds of recommendations and dozens of briefs to bodies such as this one. We have met with considerable success: Nova Scotia women on average are far more likely to be registered in law school, medical school or business school than they were a generation ago. The wage gap, although still a significant concern, has narrowed slightly. Women's educational level is, in general, equal to that of men. Nevertheless, we find that certain subgroups of women still face huge barriers in achieving stable and meaningful employment. For example, Aboriginal women, racialized women, women recently arrived in Canada–all these face disadvantage and discrimination in the labour market. No group faces more severe hurdles than women with disabilities, particularly when this is combined with any of the previously mentioned sources of discrimination and disadvantage.

Canada has taken welcome steps to increasing the capacity of persons with disabilities to be active contributors to our labour force. Nevertheless, virtually none of the measures undertaken or proposed take the situation of women with disabilities into account in an explicit manner. It is as if being a "person" with a disability somehow neutralizes the impacts of gender. The effect of these gender-neutral approaches is seen in the results of the most recent national Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) (*Statistics Canada, 2001*) on these issues:

- Less than half of women with disabilities in Nova Scotia were in the paid labour force in 2001, compared to more than 80% of women without disabilities. *(Statistics Canada, 2001).*
- The proportion of Nova Scotian women with disabilities who did not work outside the home in the year 2000 (ie., 53.6%) was the third highest in the country after Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec.
- In Nova Scotia, working-age women with disabilities had an average total income of only $15,726 in 2001 compared to $20,871 for women without disabilities.
- The average total income of women with disabilities, $15,726, was significantly lower than that of men with disabilities, whose earnings averaged $25,173, and men without disabilities at $32,871.
- Close to three-quarters of women with disabilities in Nova Scotia survived on less than $20,000 in 2001, compared to 57% of women without disabilities.
- The median income of women with disabilities in 2001 was $10,421, compared to men with disabilities at $20,610. (*McFadyen, 2006*)
- Compared to men with disabilities and women and men without disabilities, women with disabilities who are employed:
    - report the highest levels of stress at work
    - are the most likely to fear losing their job in the next year

- are the most likely to feel overqualified for their job, and
- are the least likely to be promoted. *(CCSD, 2002 and 2003)*

These statistics show how pervasive social exclusion and poverty are in the lives of women with disabilities.

Our presentation today builds not only on statistics, but also on the efforts of women with disabilities to make their voices heard. Thirteen years ago, the Nova Scotia Task Force on the Economic Integration of Women with Disabilities brought forward 27 recommendations from deliberations with 79 women with disabilities. At this time, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women is reviewing that work, to determine what progress has been made, and what steps still need to be taken.

The Disability Wall

"Because of both their gender and their disability, women often face a unique obstacle course when trying to navigate their way through the world of paid work." *(Fawcett, 2000)* This includes employability which is "...the combination of factors and processes which enable people to progress towards or get into employment, to stay in employment and to move in the workplace." (*Employability Framework for Scotland, 2006*)

For many women with disabilities there exists what we term a disability wall. This disability wall is made up of discrete but interconnected systemic and attitudinal barriers that remain entrenched to delay, discourage or prevent women with disabilities from participating in the labour market to their full potential. Those who experience physical, mental or intellectual disability meet distinct barriers at home, in the community and in the workplace to hinder employability.

Barriers in the Workplace

In the workplace there are a myriad of barriers for women with disabilities. Research which has looked at the employment support needs of persons with disabilities has shown that the need for "modified work structures" such as handrails/ramps, accessible transportation to and from work, parking, elevators, and washrooms, and modified work stations, is almost twice as high (28% versus 15%) among persons with disabilities who are unemployed as compared to persons with disabilities who are employed. This suggests that a person's need for such modified workplace structures may make them more vulnerable to job loss and increase their difficulty in finding employment. *(Canadian Council on Social Development, 2005)*

Persons with disabilities are more likely to require "work aids or job modifications" such as job redesign (eg., modified or different duties), modified work hours, human supports (eg., readers, sign language interpreters), technical aids, specialized computers and software, and communication aids (eg., Braille or large-print reading materials) than the infrastructure changes described above. Approximately thirty percent of employed persons with disabilities require

work aids or job modifications. As was the case above, unemployed persons with disabilities are substantially more likely to require these types of aids or modifications, suggesting again, that a greater need for employment supports may be linked to greater job instability.

The Disability Wall

Accessible Transportation	Accommodation	Promotion and Upward Mobility	Access to Well-Paying Work	Recognition of Capability
Childcare	Exclusion	Underemployment	Wage Gap	Fear
Eldercare	Harassment	Non-Standard Work	Negative Attitudes	Bridging supports to paid work
Inaccessible Buildings	Discrimination	Assistive Devices	Lack of Attendant Care	Flexible Work Arrangements
Inaccessible Workstation/office	Stereotyping	Training	Acceptance	Support at Home

Regardless of the type of support required, the unmet support needs of employed persons with disabilities are significant. These unmet needs serve as major impediments to the labour force participation and security of persons with disabilities and could be met with relatively little cost to employers, according to the Canadian Abilities Foundation (CAF). CAF estimates that the annual workplace accommodation costs for almost all workers who have a disability are under $1,500.00.

Another major barrier relates to the loss of disability-related benefits that results from the transition to paid work from income assistance or other types of government support programs. When taking paid employment results in the loss of essential benefits, such as having a drug

plan, it is no surprise that so many women with disabilities make the decision to withdraw from or never enter the paid labour force.

Barriers At Home

For women with disabilities, being able to participate fully in the paid work force also requires additional supports in the home. Gender roles are still such that women continue to have primary responsibility for the unpaid work and care-giving. The time and energy required to complete day to day household chores and to provide care to children and others is greater for women with disabilities. Without adequate supports in the home, full participation in the workplace may not be possible for these women. At home barriers also include accessible transportation, access to childcare, eldercare, respite care, attendant care, assistive devices, and harmonization between family and work responsibilities.

Barriers in the Community

In the community barriers include accessible transportation, harassment, discrimination, social exclusion, lack of accessible buildings. Some women with disabilities cite attitude as the greatest barrier. *(Fawcett, 2000)* Negative beliefs and attitudes that employers and the public hold towards women and men with disabilities are considered, by them, to be among the most significant barriers to employment and full inclusion. While perhaps stemming from a lack of awareness of disability and disability issues, attitudinal barriers include the fear of being around persons with highly visible disabilities, making negative judgements or assumptions about individuals' capabilities and potential because their speech or appearance is different, being treated as though one was a child, invisible, asexual, among many others. (Fawcett, 2000)

Our present labour market demeans women with disabilities because it is not accessible despite their abilities to work. We have to change our workplaces to be more welcoming, supportive, and rewarding for women with disabilities.

In addition to facing attitudinal barriers, women with disabilities must also contend with gender biases. For example, women with disabilities may be perceived as being dependent on or being taken care of by someone else and therefore not really in need of paid employment. In reality, women with disabilities have a high degree of financial responsibility and face an extraordinarily high risk of deep poverty. Proportionally more women with disabilities live alone than do women without disabilities. They are also more likely to be divorced, separated or widowed[7]; in other words, employability is key to their economic well-being.

How these barriers are connected and experienced depend on the nature of the disability and the degree to which it can be corrected through accommodation and assistive devices. In Nova Scotia it also depends to a large degree on a women's social and geographical location.

It does not take long for many women to hit the disability wall. Some barriers, in and of

themselves, are deal breakers for women with physical disabilities who want to work. If you live in rural Nova Scotia and do not have accessible transportation then you will not be able to get to work. If you have accessible transportation but the workplace you are qualified to work in is not accessible, once again the door to employment is closed to you.

In addition to facing attitudinal barriers, women with disabilities must also contend with gender biases. For example, women with disabilities may be perceived as being dependent on or being taken care of by someone else and therefore not really in need of paid employment. In reality, women with disabilities have a high degree of financial responsibility and face an extraordinarily high risk of deep poverty. Proportionally more women with disabilities live alone than do women without disabilities. They are also more likely to be divorced, separated or widowed[7]; in other words, employability is key to their economic, social and physical well-being.

How these barriers are connected and experienced depend on the nature of the disability and the degree to which it can be corrected through accommodation and assistive devices. In Nova Scotia it also depends to a large degree on a women's social and geographical location.

Many women with disabilities are qualified but are not working. Many of those who are unemployed are underemployed. A paradigm shift in the labour market is needed to break down the barriers in the disability wall. With the gradual recognition that Nova Scotia and Canada will need maximum labour force participation to meet the demands of our economy it is particularly important to take advantage of the willing and qualified women who are available to work.

Recommendations

Based on the above considerations, we recommend that:

1. **A gender and diversity analysis of existing and proposed measures be conducted, to identify practical steps and new opportunities for the employment of women with disabilities.**

- Labour Market Development Agreements, Employability Assistance for People with Disabilities, the provision of assistive devices and technologies, transitions from income support to employment, tax measures, transportation policy and programs: these are just some examples of policy areas that would benefit from an explicit consideration of gender and diversity issues, with the goal of identifying new opportunities to enhance the labour market and income situation of women with disabilities.

2. **All women with disabilities should have access to a system navigator/case worker whose primary responsibility is to ensure that the woman gets all the benefits and supports to which she is entitled, from federal, provincial and municipal sources.**

- Electronic access is not adequate if it is not accompanied by the assistance of trained and supportive experts. These may be paid staff in either government or community-based organizations, who have had proper sensitivity training, and who may, indeed, have first-hand experience with disability. Such an initiative could make government and community agencies employers of choice for many women with disabilities.

- Despite government efforts to make information about policies and programs readily accessible to any individual who needs it, many women with disabilities, as well as those who want to help them, face great difficulty in finding their way through the service maze. Increasing reliance on electronic resources and call centre technology makes access to information even more difficult for women who do not have access to the Internet or the ability to use either the Internet or telephone technology at a high level of competence.

3. **Women with disabilities should be supported by Employability, Career Development and Employment Counselling programs in achieving their full educational potential in traditionally male-dominated as well as female-dominated fields, with a particular focus on science and technology occupations.**

- Specialized career centers for persons with disabilities should include explicit gender and diversity objectives among their outcome measures.

- Community-based organizations that address the employability needs of women, such as Women's Employment Outreach in Halifax and women's centres across the province should be assisted in the delivery of service to women with disabilities, including accessibility issues and training needs.

- Models such as the Greater Halifax Business Leadership Network should be evaluated to determine its impact on the employability of women with disabilities, and to identify areas for improvement

- The emphasis of education, training, counselling and career development should be on empowering women with disabilities to find and keep well-paying jobs at their full potential in all sectors of the economy, including entrepreneurship and self-employment.

4. **Employment Support Services for women with disabilities should include assistance for personal care, transportation, housework, child care and caregiving when they enter the paid workforce, through self-managed care programs funded through EAPD.**

- For all women, the harmonization of work and family responsibilities presents barriers to employability. For women with disabilities, however, these barriers are frequently insurmountable. The limited data available show that women with disabilities are more

likely to need "help with everyday activities" and "specialized features in the home" than men with disabilities (PALS 2001), possibly because they have more role-based responsibilities in housework, parenting and caregiving. No employability intervention for women with disabilities can be effective if these issues are not addressed.

5. **Access to Employability Support Services and bridging supports to well-paid work should be flexible and long-term, an investment in women with disabilities.**

- Transition to employment for women with multiple barriers to employment can be a long-term process. It requires flexibility and perseverance on the part of women and on the part of service delivery agencies and employers to produce positive outcomes in the end.

6. **Review and amend the interaction among various income security benefits and social and health benefits to ensure that benefits are maintained and disincentives to employment are removed.**

- Transition from various kinds of income supports and benefits (pharmacare, home care, subsidized transportation and childcare, housing, etc.) can result in high effective marginal tax rates. In other words, the dollar value of the loss of benefits is greater than the gain in earned income, nullifying any incentive to employment.

7. **Federal, provincial and municipal governments should collaborate to improve accessible transportation services for women and men with disabilities.**

- Every consultation with women with disabilities shows clearly that transportation remains a key barrier to employability. Accessible transportation services are an imperative for employability, and their improvement in both urban and rural areas is a *sine qua non* of employability for both women and men with disabilities.

8. **Labour Standards legislation, both federally and provincially, should be amended to include requirements to accommodate the workplace needs of women and men with disabilities.**

- All women with disabilities are entitled to a labour market and a workplace that are accessible and inclusive in both physical and social dimensions.

- While Human Rights Acts are important tools for advancing employment equality for women with disabilities, the difficulties inherent in a complaints-based process reduce their effectiveness. Labour Standards legislation would offer a more proactive approach.

9. **Improved support for the integration and accommodation of women with disabilities is especially important to small and medium business and non-profit organizations, since they are the employers of most Nova Scotians.**

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